

Cropsey Native Was Rhodes Scholar and World-Class Historian

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The Rhodes Scholarship is the most famous international scholarship program in the world. Cropsey native Gene A. Brucker was a Rhodes Scholar and went on to become a world-renowned historian.

Gene A. Brucker's family roots go back to Germany. Gottlieb Frederick Brucker was born in Germany in 1832. Gottlieb emigrated from Germany to the Cropsey area in 1850 when he was 18 years of age. Katharine A. Glabe was also born in Germany in 1837.

In 1857, Fairbury was formed when the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad laid its tracks from Peoria east to the Indiana border. Two years after Fairbury was founded, 27-year-old Gottlieb Brucker married 22-year-old Katharine Glabe in Ford County. The first child of Gottlieb and Katharine Brucker was Adam Brucker.

Adam Brucker married Paulena Stahl in 1881. Adam and Paulena Brucker had a large family of nine children. One of their children was Walter Charles Brucker, who was born in 1889 in Cropsey. Walter Brucker married Alberta E. Koehler in 1921.

Walter Brucker farmed 240 acres in Cropsey. Walter and Alberta Brucker had one daughter and two sons. One of their sons, Gene A. Brucker, was born in 1928. On his father's farm, Gene learned a good work ethic at an early age. Gene got up each morning at six AM and helped his father milk the cows. They raised corn, oats, soybeans, milk cows, pigs, and chickens on their farm.

In a 2002 oral interview recorded at the University of California at Berkley, Gene Brucker recounted that his father was very skilled mechanically and biologically. His father wanted to become a doctor or a surgeon, but he had no schooling, and in those days, boys were expected to work and stay on the family farm. Gene Brucker's father discovered that his son had no aptitude for farming. Gene had no mechanical skills and was not good at working with machinery. Walter Brucker realized that his son Gene needed to go to college and learn another way to make a living besides being a farmer.

Gene Brucker attended the nearby country school in Cropsey through the eighth grade. Gene read all 50 books in his country school library. Gene then attended Cropsey High School, which was a mile and a half from his farm. The high school had 40 students and four teachers.

After completing Cropsey High School, Gene Brucker entered the University of Illinois in September of 1941, three months before the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in December. After Pearl Harbor, Gene enlisted in the U.S. Army but was not called up for duty until the Spring of 1943.

During his freshman year at the University of Illinois, Gene took some history courses taught by Harvard Ph.D. Raymond Stearns. Gene Brucker and Professor Stearns eventually became close friends.

When Gene was called up for duty, the military sent him to Alabama for training. Gene Brucker was then sent to France after being liberated and assigned to an army depot. Gene never saw any active battles during his time in Europe.

After World War II ended, Gene resumed his studies at the University of Illinois. By taking night classes and summer classes, he finished his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1947. Because of the influence of Professor Stearns, Gene selected history as his major for his degree. Gene then decided to continue at the University of Illinois and eventually earn his Master's degree and Ph.D. degree. Gene Brucker worked with Professor Stearns on his Master's Thesis. Gene finished his Master's degree in history in the Spring of 1948.

In 1947, while Gene was completing his Master's degree, his friend Professor Stearns suggested he apply to become a Rhodes Scholar. Professor Stearns believed that Gene had a good chance of winning the scholarship. Gene had not heard of the Rhodes Scholarship program and had to investigate and learn what it was. He found that the Rhodes Scholarship is one of the most prestigious scholarships in the world. Winners of the scholarship study for two years at the University of Oxford in England. Gene Brucker successfully earned the Rhodes Scholarship after undergoing many rounds of oral interview competitions with other students.

While studying at Oxford, Gene Brucker met many interesting students and professors. He found himself attracted to the field of Renaissance Italian history. Gene Brucker met and married Patricia Margaret Chantrell while he was a student at Oxford. They soon had a son, Mark Brucker, while living in England.

As he was nearing the completion of his two years of study at Oxford, Gene Brucker realized he needed to earn a Ph.D. to get a job at an American college. His mentor, Professor Stearns, happened to be on a sabbatical in London. Professor Stearns advised Gene to earn his Ph.D. at Princeton because they had the best people in Renaissance Italian history. Gene Brucker took his mentor's advice and entered the Ph.D. program at Princeton.

After finishing his Ph.D. in history at Princeton in 1954, Professor Gene Brucker then spent the rest of his life working at the University of California at Berkeley. Professor Brucker taught at Berkeley until he retired in 1991. He received several academic awards, including the Rhodes Scholarship, Fulbright Fellowship, Guggenheim Fellowship, and the National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship. In 1979, he was elected to the

American Academy of Arts and Sciences. After he retired, Berkeley designated Gene a Professor of History Emeritus at the university.

Professor Brucker was a specialist in early modern European history. He published more than 30 articles and essays and wrote 11 books, including *Florentine Politics and Society, 1343-1378*, and *The Civic World of Renaissance Florence*.

Professor Brucker died in 2017 at the age of 92. A colleague wrote that Brucker “was much more than a scholar — he was a citizen of the university.” His daughter, Wendy, said her father “was a very quiet, very humble man, considering his very distinguished accomplishments.” She added that he was unerringly polite and would go above and beyond to help students in their professional careers.

The small town of Cropsey can be very proud of its native son Gene Brucker who grew up on a small farm, attended country school and went on to become a world-class historian.



Gene Brucker circa 1990